

How To Build a Brush-In



The Long Trail/Appalachian Trail are supposed to be a relatively narrow footpath. But on trails that have lots of traffic, lack natural tread definers such as a tight conifer forest, have mudpits or simply a poorly defined treadway, trail users will take the path most intuitive to them. When that path is not the intended trail, braided trails or social trails are what develop.

The result of braided trails is degradation of trailside vegetation, which creates a more “trail-like” path. This visually encourages others to take that path. Degradation of trailside vegetation also hastens trail erosion as trail-edge soil loses it’s structure and it impacts the microhabitat adjacent to the trail.

The way that we deal with this type of trail widening is doing what we call “brush-ins.” Brush-ins are a type of revegetation that works particularly well on trails. It is a five-step process.

1. **Identify the undesirable tread which people are walking on that you would like to close.** Frequently, this is hikers avoiding a rock staircase, stepping over a too-tall waterbar or shortcutting a switchback. Look around and see why it is that people are going off trail. The trail may also be busy with frequent traffic passing each other in an open hardwood forest with nothing stopping people from passing instead of stepping off for others. The most successful brush-ins are those at switchbacks, turns, staircases or other features.
2. **Aerate the compacted soil of the undesirable tread.** Use a hazel hoe or pick-mattock to rough up and loosen the soil. Think of tilling in a garden but less extensive. This is done so that seeds and new growth can re-gain dominance in the impacted area. This would happen eventually, we’re just helping it to move along a little quicker.
3. **Spread organic material and duff layer on top of the undesirable tread to concentrate future vegetation growth.** This is where we go at least 25-ft off trail into the woods with a 5-gallon bucket, kneel down and scoop up lots and lots of leaves, pine needles, twigs, moss, ferns, green stuff like ferns and hobblebush. Put the organic material into the bucket, walk back to the trail and cover the undesirable tread with the organic matter.
4. **Use heavy logs, downed tree crowns, pokey and dangerous sticks and rocks to prevent hikers from walking on the undesirable tread.** These things should be big, heavy, ugly and hard to move. They should make the undesirable tread you’re trying to close off the last place that a hiker would want to walk. They should force people to walk where you want them to walk, which is the proper trail. This should be bigger than you expect. Three or four branches won’t do the trick.

5. **Spread more organic material and duff layer on top of the ugly and dangerous and pokey pile of branches.** This naturalizes the pile of branches so that it is less obvious as a pile of branches. With this, you're trying to make the "brush-in" blend in with the woods.

There are example before and after picture below of brush-ins done on the Sunset Ridge Trail on Mt. Mansfield.



For other trail examples, the the Sherburne Pass Trail north of Rt. 4/Inn at Long Trail showcases many braided trails but also excellent brush-in examples constructed in July of 2020 and 2021.

Brush-ins are a lot of work to do fully and properly! If you have areas of trail braiding on your maintained trail, gather a group of friends and get out there to haul some brush! If you need a hand, reach out to GMC. Perhaps we could schedule a day with other volunteers for a brush-in day.